

DIVUS JULIUS CAESAR

“Of the other two who have their heads downward, he who hangs from the dark snout is Brutus: see how he writhes and does not utter a word; the other is Cassius, who appears so strong.”

Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, *Inferno*, XXXIV, vv. 64–67.

Virgil puts the following words into the mouth of Anchises: — “Behold the man, behold him of whose coming you have so often heard the promise: Caesar Augustus, son of a god, who will found anew the Golden Age in the fields where Saturn once reigned and who will extend his empire even over the Garamantes and over the Indians” (*Aeneid*, VI, vv. 791–795). The “god” of whom it is spoken here is, as is well known, Julius Caesar himself, who, having never had a son, adopted his nephew Octavian. Elsewhere, the same poet indirectly gives the same title to the latter as well: — “Yes, and you also, Caesar, of whom we do not know which assembly of the gods will soon demand your presence” (*Georgics*, I, vv. 24–25).

In connection with these two quotations, there is a third, this time from Shakespeare, which does not seem to us without interest: — “If I were as you are,” says Julius Caesar, “there would be nothing easier than to make me change; if I could pray that something be changed, it is by prayer that one would change me. But I am constant like the North Star, whose fixed and permanent quality has no equal in the heavens. The firmament is filled with innumerable sparks; they are all fire, and each is brilliant; but among them all there is only one that keeps its place; and so it is in the world; it is well furnished with men, and men are flesh and blood and partake of intelligence, but of all their number I know only one who, sheltered from every attack, holds his rank, unshakable: and that one is myself, at least let me show it in this very matter, — I was constant in banishing Cimber, I am constant in letting him remain so” (*Julius Caesar*, Act II, Scene I, vv. 55–72).

One may say that, in traditional countries, every form of government has its particular symbolism; one of the most widespread forms at a given time was precisely that of empire. Apart from the Roman Empire here in question, examples are found as far apart from one another as those of China and Japan in the Far East and those of Mexico and Peru in the Far West. Now, although each organization of this kind has modalities that distinguish it from every other, one of the characteristics that all have in common is their way of insisting on the central position of the emperor himself, who is regarded as the immobile pivot around which the whole empire turns. It is for this reason that in China not only did the emperor have to dwell in his capital, which thereby became the center of the Chinese empire, but his palace itself was geographically situated at the exact center of that capital, and the hall from which he exercised his imperial function was at the center of this palace; moreover, the principal entrance of the latter was called the “Gate of Noon,” that is to say of the moment when the sun has reached the middle of its daily course¹. Thus the emperor in China was a living symbol of Divinity, and that is why he was called the “Son of Heaven.” In Japan, the Mikado is said to be descended from the sun, like the pharaoh of ancient Egypt; and when he goes out, one must lower one’s head if one is in the street, and leave roofs and every window that is not on the ground floor so as not to be situated higher than the emperor and also not to see him, the point to which he corresponds being above manifestation. We have wished to give these two examples in order to show that, as soon as there is a question of a human personification of Divinity, it is only natural that the person thus chosen should be treated as divine, without which there would be no reason to employ this symbolism; there is therein sufficient reason for Virgil to speak in such a manner of the first two Caesars². Like its equivalents elsewhere, the Roman emperor had to be taken as a symbol of the central point, that is

1 . In the time of the first dynasties, the emperor lived, in the four different seasons of the year, in four different capitals, named after the four cardinal points; we have once again the same symbolism, but taken from another point of view, the emperor here being the center which is everywhere and nowhere

2 Obviously, Julius Caesar was never emperor himself, but he was the first Caesar and the one whose preparatory work perhaps contributed more to the foundation of the Empire than any other. Moreover, he was the adoptive father of Augustus, and it is worth noting that, in the history of a new dynasty, it is the ancestor of its first representative who is often more important than the latter himself, since symbolically the ancestor is to the dynasty itself what its emperors are to the whole Empire; from this point of view, the emperor becomes the equivalent of Pure Being, while the ancestor corresponds to Non-Being

to say as an incarnation of stability and equilibrium; and this all the more since the emperor was also Pontifex Maximus and thus united in himself both spiritual authority and temporal power.

It seems to us that this interpretation is quite sufficient to show the significance of passages such as those we have just cited from Virgil, but there is another aspect of the question: to what extent was the person who occupied such a function, or was he not, effectively worthy of the homage and respect that his subjects rendered to him as a symbol? If the symbol is worth more than the lack of a symbol, a symbol that is, in a sense, identical with the thing symbolized itself is obviously worth much more still; that is to say that, for an empire whose emperor effectively possesses the spiritual state symbolized by his title, there will be an advantage comparable to that which, in another domain, a true spiritual master has for a disciple over someone who is only his representative, as M. F. Schuon has indicated in this very review³; and when Confucius says that the ancients, in order to govern their kingdoms well, first attained Knowledge and that after that everything was stable and in its proper place, he only gives proof of it. Indeed, in antiquity, it seems that, if this was not always the case, it was very often so⁴; what would astonish would be to find an example of the identity of which we are speaking so late as the epoch of the Roman Empire; but we think that this is precisely what is implied in our last quotation, that of Shakespeare, since he who, sheltered from every attack, holds his rank, unshakable, is a very exact description of someone who sees all things in the “eternal present.”

It is known that the existence of esoteric organizations generally remains hidden, but there are moments, whether of disorder or of general degeneration, when they feel themselves more or less forced to

3 See *Études traditionnelles*, November–December 1939 issue, “Considerations on spiritual functions,” pp. 350–357.

4 On this question in general, see *Études traditionnelles*, the article by M. A. Coomaraswamy in the special folklore number, p. 28 ff., and also the note he added in *ibid.*, February 1950 number, p. 81, where he says that “the Pharaoh was regarded as being at once literally the Son of the Sun and of a human mother.” This identity extends to lower domains: thus, the Roman priests were called pontifices or “bridge-builders,” which one does not understand in the historical example, but it is very probable that originally it was so, for there were sacred bridges in Italy until a fairly recent period.

intervene, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, in public affairs; in Italy, the troubled period of the last century before Jesus Christ seems to have been one of these moments; and one may suppose that the secret leaders of the Roman State intervened almost openly in politics through the intermediary of Julius Caesar himself, who would thus have played a role analogous to that played before him by Alexander and that would be played after him by Charlemagne. The true scope of the quotation from Shakespeare⁵ should now be clearer. Likewise, the verses we have cited from Virgil would have even greater force if those whom he calls “gods” were so not merely because of the symbolism of their social position, but effectively. It is perhaps not without relation to our question that Dante places Julius Caesar in the first circle of Hell with, among others, personages as different as Hector, the Brutus who drove out the Tarquins, Saladin, Heraclitus, and Averroes; fundamentally, we have here one of the passages of the Divine Comedy that must be transposed elsewhere in order to give it its true situation, and which is placed thus only for the same reasons that forced the author to conceal so many other things, for it is evident that we are faced with a recognition, however veiled it may be, of the unity of traditions⁶. Elsewhere, in this same poem, Augustus is called “the Clement,” and Tiberius is specially praised because it was under him that the crucifixion of Christ took place. One will also recall that Dante believes in the divine origin of the Roman Empire and that he does not seem to make a distinction between the ancient Caesarian empire and the holy Christian empire, which explains why the latter was called the Holy

5 The passage we have just quoted does not seem to us any longer to be truly understood, even by Caesar’s admirers; it is habitually taken as an orgulous boast, while what is depicted there is a great man fully conscious of his true value, which is not at all the same thing.

6 There are other personages, such as Muhammad, Ali, and Emperor Frederick II, whom Dante places in Hell, but who, being given their strange appearances among the pagan philosophers (see René Guénon, *L’ésotérisme de Dante*, pp. 48–51), make the situation of the first two enigmatic; as for Frederick II, moreover, in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, I, 12, Dante calls him “heroic Augustus,” and since it is then probable that it was precisely this emperor who initiated him into the *fideli d’Amore*, of which Dante is known to have been a member, it is evident that he too cannot be in Hell. For Muhammad and Ali, see Aron Zysow, *Dante l’arabe, Révolutionnaire et Socialiste*, Éditions Nizami, Paris, 1939, pp. 151–158; he very well understands the scope of what he had discovered, and proves in a sufficiently conclusive manner that it is really Robert Guiscard, king of Naples, and his son Charles, who are masked under the names of Muhammad and his fourth successor. The question of Frederick II is more difficult to resolve, but it is quite possible that he himself is hidden in the poem under another name, for there are many personages whom one has never been able to identify. We have cited these two cases only to show how difficult Dante is and to support what we suppose concerning the transposition of the entire passage to another place, very probably Paradise.

Roman Empire and not the Holy Christian Empire. There is yet another reason to suppose that he who was the true founder of this empire, thus divinely established, was more than a simple conqueror as the biographers of Julius Caesar usually represent him. In any case, this is how traditional literature has understood his character. History itself does not oppose such an interpretation; on the contrary, it becomes more explicit if Caesar is envisaged in this way. There is a fact of capital importance for the true understanding of his role, but which most of those who have taken an interest in his life have only noted without drawing any implications from it: it is that Julius Caesar became Pontifex Maximus in the year 63 before Jesus Christ; thus he occupied the highest spiritual function of the Roman hierarchy nineteen years before being assassinated. The true importance of this function has perhaps never been understood and doubtless never will be, for lack of sufficient information, but it is known that the college of pontifices had been instituted during the epoch of the kings, probably by Numa Pompilius; and if the title of king was abolished, that of Pontifex Maximus remained intact; and since in antiquity, in general, every sacerdotal office implied an esoteric aspect, there is no reason to suppose that this one was an exception, given that it survived when that of king disappeared⁷. One will now understand how little important for Julius Caesar were his conquests and his literary works in comparison with his role as spiritual chief of the whole Roman Empire and with what this implies of spiritual qualities. If this interpretation of his role as intermediary is admitted, several facts of his life are explained thereby: when he was in difficulties with the powerful Sulla, it was the Vestals⁸ who prevented his being put to death; then, the fact that he instituted a

7 One may perhaps object that the title of Pontifex Maximus still belongs today to the Pope, whose function is currently exoteric, and that consequently the office in question has always been of this nature; but this argument would not be at all conclusive, since one could very well say that, on the contrary, the survival of the title of Pontifex Maximus is rather proof that the Papacy itself has changed its original character. One could add in this connection that in the Middle Ages Julius Caesar was sometimes represented as a bishop, notably in *Les Fastes des Romains*; moreover, in the *Trésor* of Brunetto Latini, he is said to have been “the first emperor of the Romans,” another historical inaccuracy, but less blatant perhaps than many other, more exact observations.

8 To understand the true scope of this intervention, one must be somewhat aware of the position of the Vestal Virgins and the influence they enjoyed. Their function was very internal, so to speak; they had exceptional privileges and the great men themselves consulted them. On the other hand, if one of them failed to meet the conditions of her office, the punishment was extremely severe, for, for certain offenses, they were buried alive.

new order of priests, the Juliani, at the head of which was Mark Antony; moreover, the mysterious history of the Gallic legion *Alauda*, or “the lark,” which he founded among a people who had many reasons to be hostile to him and whose members, on the contrary, were absolutely devoted to him, a legion whose existence his rivals entirely ignored, so well was the oath, secretly sworn to Caesar, kept. In addition, one will remember that some claimed that he suffered from an illness which posterity has diagnosed as epilepsy, for it is recounted that he was sometimes seen seated in his tent, pale as a corpse and trembling gently, without reacting to anything whatsoever, and that this state lasted for hours; now, there is another personage, of an even higher order, for whom a similar diagnosis has been made, for the enemies of the Prophet Muhammad said as much of him; it seems in both cases that it is a question of the state of *samādhi* of the Hindus, which one might perhaps describe as a foretaste, so to speak, of Supreme Union itself⁹. Virgil, it seems to us, did not at all exaggerate in making the race of the Caesars

9 We will have already seen why Caesar wanted to be deified even during his lifetime. As for Augustus, his case is much less easy to clarify, especially because the facts of his life have been even more falsified by posterity than those of his adoptive father, and malicious rumors, often found even in official history, have obscured other, more interesting details. However, one thing seems certain: he was very aware of his office and what it represented, and he understood its symbolic value very well. It is for this reason, no doubt, that he allowed himself to be called *princeps*, thus avoiding the detested name of king and, nevertheless, retaining a title with a very appropriate meaning if he relaxed the idea of having statues erected in his honor, as was done for the gods. He nevertheless allowed Virgil and Ovid to grant him the title of *divus*. The allusion made by the former, in our quotation, to the return of the Golden Age seems, to modern ears, exaggerated, although there may very well be an esoteric meaning there. As, moreover, throughout the *Endides*; but, even taking it literally, one cannot deny that the *Pax Romana* was something quite astonishing, given the ecclesiastical conditions of the *Kali Yuga*, and which can undoubtedly only be explained by the temporal proximity of the ninth avatar. It is not for nothing either that the doors of the temple of Janus were closed, and if they were closed during the reign of Augustus, it was because, to the extent possible in his time, he had restored harmony and balance. Moreover, in medieval legends, he and his court play a rather impressive role; he is said to be the possessor of a vast treasure, and it should be remembered that treasure symbolizes Knowledge (see Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, V. v 4731), while Virgil is often depicted as a magician, reminiscent of Arthur and Merlin in Celtic tales. In Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, Cymbeline himself, under the bad influence of his wife, refuses to pay the tribute due to Augustus; but he eventually does so, even though his army has defeated the Roman legions sent to subjugate him. He explains it with these words: “Although we are the victor, we will submit to Caesar and the Roman Empire: we promise our customary tribute, which our malevolent queen had incited us to refuse.” Here, the symbolism of money and tribute in particular is at issue—that is to say, not political, but spiritual relationships, since money is a symbol of the spiritual influence that only priestly authority could disseminate. Thus, Cymbeline's refusal would have constituted a spiritual revolt, and it was only after the queen's death that he saw what he had done and submitted. One gets the impression that Augustus is taken here as a symbol of the King of the World, which would be entirely justified, given the significance the word *Mundus* held for the peoples of the Mediterranean during this period (see *Etudes Traditionnelles*, March 1940 issue, F. Schuon, *De Exotérisme*, p. 64, note 1). One last remark: it may not be without significance that Augustus and Julius still appear in the European calendar.

descend from Iulus, son of Aeneas, for if it was not so in fact, it was nevertheless so in the spiritual sense, which is much more important; it would also seem that Dante was quite right to put Brutus and Cassius in his Hell, near Judas Iscariot, between the very jaws of Satan.